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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the impact of mass media, especially television, on the educational process and outlines implications for the future. Studies point out that children view an average of 8,000 hours of television annually between ages three and five. Positive effects include increase in the vocabulary of young children, a better appreciation of different cultural characteristics, a wider understanding of issues, and better concepts of geography. A major negative effect is that television does not encourage children to think or probe deeply. Negative role models and violence are also undesirable and formal education seems tedious and demanding to children who are used to being passively entertained. Most crucial is the impact of media in supporting materialism, hedonism, and unchecked consumption of scarce resources. Therefore, action that could enhance future survival depends on public influence over the media. Presently, the media as a vehicle of social change influence appearance, language, family, politics, religion, and status. Educational implications are that instead of specialization, an understanding of the complex world requires interdisciplinary scholarship, critical viewing, and new values; serious studies of the impact of the mass media must be made; educators and the general public must find ways to influence all media; and educators should examine more extensive use of media in private and public education. The author cites passages from the works of Marshall McLuhan and John McHale ("The Future of the Future"). (Author/KC)

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Mass Media Values and the Future of Education

by
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> ...these media virtually extend our psychical environment, providing a constant stream of moving, fleeting images of the world for our daily appraisal. ...Through these devices we can telescope time, move through history and span the world in a great variety of unprecedented ways.
>
> John McHale THE PLASTIC PARTHENON

The Silicon Syndrome: Randomizing Our Synapses

The literature of futures studies is filled with references to the great transition from the industrial era to a period described as post-industrial society, the information age, the era of cybernation, the silicon revolution, and the like. Many futurists say that values appropriate for coping, adjusting, inventing, planning--in a word, living--before the transformation may be inadequate or even counterproductive in the age of mass advertising and information. Roles of older institutions (such as schools and families) involved in the process of learning and socialization are now being subsumed at least in part by the mass media. This raises the question of just how viable and effective attitudes and values advanced by the media may be for survival and optimum realization of the human potential. If children are being programmed to view the world through the prisms of film and television, educators must actively examine the randomization of synapses induced by present mass media utilization.

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Because many people concede that the transformation is already in process, timely futures research continues, and at least some of its characteristics are already known. Automation, cybernation, computers, and electronic information systems play major roles today in information processing. Home-based mini-computers and electronic data searches are just now becoming familiar to many Americans, and the mass media have been with us long enough so that many aspects of their impact have been studied and evaluated as well. The question is not how much research has been conducted, but rather what kinds of research. As early as 1965, Charles Steinberg pointed out that while the media have created a social and cultural revolution as far-reaching as the Industrial Revolution of the Nineteenth century, educators have a myopic and distorted view of their effects. Lacking genuinely comprehensive studies on the impact of mass communications, intellectual snobbery and a myriad of unscientific viewpoints abound. Teachers have tended to either ignore public preference for programs or have tried (with variable degrees of success) to apply present programming to classroom learning. Educational theory has concentrated on "schooling" and social forces instead of the transmission of information and values. Future cultural historians will continue to assess the significance of the mass media in terms of their educational and social influence, but the literature today is lacking in adequate treatment on a more comprehensive scale.

There are differences of opinion concerning just what constitutes the mass media and how important each medium may be in socialization and learning. Books and newspapers were obviously more powerful as change agents when they

had no competition from radio, films, or television. As children some of us may recall life changes influenced by radio, because television had not yet been distributed for home use. Historian Robert Sobel's provocative book entitled THE MANIPULATORS defines mass media as the press, films, radio, television, and universities. It is Sobel's belief that universities propagandize as much as any other medium. Some of us forget that popular music, science fiction novels, light shows, and closed-circuit television are also media. The word "mass" implies universal distribution and remote production of the media. Some elements such as television and recorded music are as encompasing as the air we breathe.

At present, there is a good deal of interest in the negative characteristics of some of the media, especially television. P.T.A. groups have expressed concern about the sex and violence viewed by children. Educators are in the process of studying the relationship of viewing to reading ability, and the possible effect of the media on decline of ACT scores. It is also interesting to note that one of the major criticisms of the radical futurists is that they have tended to play down the impact of the media. Ivan Illich, Everett Reimer, Arthur Waskow and other advocates of "deschooling," who challenge the "hidden curriculum" of schools, fail to observe that much of that curriculum is carried by the mass media. Educators must abandon critical ignorance and uncritical acceptance of the media in favor of serious study of the way media values permeate the culture and cast the shape of things to come.

Propaganda is no stranger to modern mass communications. In contemporary society, little distinction is made between information and entertainment. It

may be very hard for a child to distinguish between "play death" as seen in a movie for television and the "real death" depicted on the CBS evening news. In the CULTURE OF NARCISSIMS, Christopher Lasch makes a strong case against the media for changing the categories of truth and falsehood. He says that no relationship to reality is intended when the idea is to sell or convince. Half truths have been shown more effective than lies in determining what is believable. A personality with great credibility like Walter Cronkite can make almost any statement plausible. Sobel makes the same point by showing how Raymond Burr got hundreds of invitations to address bar associations after only one season as Perry Mason. That Burr was an actor with little legal training was not important, because the illusion he created was so strong. If futurists like Robert Theobald are correct about the vital role of unbiased information for survival, these new canons of conviction may prove critical. How the communications are presented is also important. Government efforts to alter the behavior of citizens or attempts by manufacturers to sell products take into account both the creation of effective messages and the way in which those messages are packaged for delivery to the public. We have become quite familiar with Marshall McLuhan's statement that "the medium is message" (or massage).

Significant technological changes are expected to transform and intensify the future of the media. Video discs, cable TV with talkback provisions, home and box office movies and home computers connected to centralized memory banks are already having some impact. For today and the immediate future, however, it is reasonably safe to say that television is the most important medium. It is an invincible force in creating attitudes and a major means of transmitting

the culture to the young. While it may be argued that the media tend to reflect the society more than they influence it, that does not reduce the educational problem. Networks are now using high level consultants to determine how effective television is as an instrument for teaching. Educators must also examine the media and find ways to change or promote the values the media transfer or create.

Studies are inconclusive about how television impacts the lives of young children. Some research shows that commercials set to music first get the attention of infants. It is known that American children view an average of 8,000 hours of television annually between the age of three and five. This includes nearly 100,000 commercials. By the age of fifteen, most children in the United States will have spent more time with the "tube" than in the classroom. Sociologists point out that children in lower socio-economic families view more television because they have fewer other choices about how to use their time. No large group of children in America, however, is without exposure to television.

Reading experts and early childhood educators are not in agreement on how much television may affect preschoolers, but they agree it is a very potent force. Sesame Street, although it did not fully accomplish what was intended, is highly praised for delivering sound and sight to millions of children every day. The vocabulary of the average youngster has increased dramatically in quantity and sophistication compared to the pre-television period. On entering school, children generally have a much better appreciation of different cultural characteristics and a wider understanding of issues than ever before. Because of the global nature of the media, better concepts of

geography and different patterns of living are also evident. As television continues to carry multicultural messages, it may improve race relations as it offers many models of manners, dress, and deportment.

On the negative side, the wiser vocabulary and more diverse exposure are not matched by depth of knowledge. Children know a little about everything, but television has not encouraged them to probe or think deeply. This superficial sophistication takes out the surprise and first impact value teachers once got from introducing new "subjects." Children's television expert Roger Fransecky points out that the children consequently come into the classroom confused. Television makes no demands on them, but teachers expect them to listen and respond on cue. Intelligent students do not always respond well to traditional methods of teaching because they are accustomed to packaged learning with entertainment. Formal learning seems slow and cumbersome to children as teachers are not at all like Big Bird. John Holt points out that a large proportion of the TV generation become psychological dropouts in school by grade three because of the change in demand.

Of course children consume television in different ways. No conclusion of the effect of the mass media is sound without considering factors like age, the home environment and differences in personality. Parents who do what the networks advertise and control what children watch can make a big difference, especially if there is conversation about the programs. Comparisons show that Israeli youngsters watch less television than Americans, but they recall more of what they have seen. Viewing is especially harmful if it replaces reading, talking, play, and imagination in the life of the

child. Television requires no interaction of the kind reading demands and imagination is limited by the myriad of continuous programs. Viewing does little to teach children how to share, cooperate, or play together. Lonely and isolated children may seek models from the tube that are of questionable value. Everyone on television seems to be beautiful and talented. Role models furnished by Charlie's Angels or The Dukes of Hazzard are neither realistic nor necessarily desirable. The Surgeon General has said that while it cannot be shown that violence on television causes violence in people, children with tendencies toward anti-social behavior often imitate the behavior seen on violent shows.

"Public service" messages asking parents to view television shows with their children do not necessarily free the major networks from the responsibility of programming. In these advertisements for credibility the actors state that shows are "not for everybody." But this rationality denies the hypnotic and habit-forming nature of television. Recently, however, CBS has suggested a list of books to be read to further study historical topics presented. In cooperation with the NEA, more and more shows of historical and social importance are being shown during "prime time." Although this trend is gratifying, these kinds of productions are few and far between, and constitute less than ten percent of normal programming.

Packaged Values: McLuhan's Unwritten Message (or Massage)

Those concerns which have been expressed are significant, but they are not the most fundamental problems of the media age. Even more crucial is the overall impact of the media in supporting materialism, hedonism, keeping up with the Fonzies, and unchecked consumption of scarce resources. The mass

media is dominated by commercial interests to the extent that future alternatives are very limited unless they call for growth and a continuation of what Veblen called "conspicuous consumption." In TOOLS FOR CONVIVIALITY, Illich argues that the human equilibrium is open and able to change to whatever lifestyle might be desirable in a future convival society. It is the economic and industrial system which is organized for indefinite expansion and the creation of new "needs" (which quickly become necessities). It follows that any alteration of the system that might enhance future survival depends on some public influence over the media, to include advertising.

Canadian communications theorist Marshall McLuhan has treated aspects of the mass media in books such as THE GUTENBERG GALAXY, UNDERSTANDING MEDIA, and THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE. His concepts are praised by some and condemned by others, but they should not be ignored. McLuhan forces us to rethink the entire process of earning a living in the era of cybernation and electronic systems of information. He suggests that infatuation with television and the electronic age itself may be responsible for much of the apathy, rebellion, and lack of motivation currently reported in school classrooms. His concern with the impact of shared experiences (such as watching American astronauts land on the surface of the moon) gave rise to his provocative concept of the "global village."

McLuhan attacks the public school curriculum for its fragmented character and its lack of depth. Schools lead to specialization and research but not to unifying principles that might help us cope with emergent or anticipated problems of future living. He believes that intense specialization is an industrial era need, oriented to a set of life conditions now past:

> In education the conventional division of the curriculum is already as outdated as the medieval trivium and quadrivium after the Renaissance. Any subject taken in depth at once relates to other subjects. ...Continued in their present patterns of fragmented unrelation, our school curricula will insure a citizenry unable to understand the cybernated world in which they live.
>
> (UNDERSTANDING MEDIA, p. 268)

A call for general (as opposed to specialized) education and a need for order and clarity in the curriculum is common in educational theory, spanning the thought of such divergent educational philosophers as John Dewey and Robert Hutchins. But McLuhan believes that the media themselves may be used to combat the stagnation of the schools in an age of accelerating change. Futurists like George Leonard and E.F. Schumacher are very much interested in ways of producing a world view not limited by institutions like schools or powerful industrial corporations. In SLAUGHTERHOUSE-FIVE, Kurt Vonnegut once remarked that events from different times can now be viewed all at one time. McLuhan takes this position too when he says that the mass media make all civilizations contemporary with our own. He believes that the world is now revealed through the mass media like a growing plant in an enormously accelerated time-lapse film, making it possible for people to perceive possible casual connections and relationships as never before. Synergetic and symbiotic associations, vital to ecology and human well being, could be taught by mass media if they were used for that purpose. Under the control of present day economic and advertising interests, archaic industrial values threaten to destroy the very basis upon which a better future might be built. It follows that people must gain control over the mass media to insure survival and to invent a human future.

McLuhan believes that markets and education designed to cope with the products of mechanical production and labor are no longer adequate. In order to maintain growth and profits, modern manufacturers have educated the people in the culture of consumption. Production of commodities in ever increasing numbers requires an ever larger market to absorb them. With no public control over the media, advertising serves not only to sell products but to promote the consumption of goods and services as a way of life. Surely some counterweight to this potent force is needed in an age of impending energy decline and the depletion of vital natural resources.

John McHale's work calls attention to the failure of the intellectual establishment to understand and use the mass media of communication. He sees a new planetary culture, the chief characteristics of which are accelerating industrial technology, automation, and a multiplicity of new communication channels to accommodate vastly expanding levels of information. This new culture is as different from the old as a wheeled cart is different from Gemini or Vostok. McHale is optimistic about the ability of human beings to cope with and control technological change, but only if they can gain basic understanding of the forces which shape their world. He agrees with McLuhan that when the image on the tube replaces the printed word on paper, there may be a withering away of abstract thought and a replacement of logic with emotion. As the adage dictates, a picture may be worth a thousand words, but the words become specific and descriptive rather than creative. Standardization of taste and uniformity in mass culture do not concern McHale. Uniform culture was the primitive enclave of pre-industrial society with limited forms and life styles. As human consciousness is expanded electronically to global

interlinkage, people may experience more in a single life-span than ever before. We now face the possibility of several "generations" within one lifetime as the Vietnam, Watergate, Koreagate, Iran-gate (as opposed to Iron Curtain), and Pepsi generations compress time. With mass production but selective consumption, the either/or dichotomy no longer applies. We can enjoy both classical and popular music.

Essentially, McHale believes that world communications, (Telstar, the press, radio, television, cinema, and computer directed techniques of automation) create a common cultural environment on a global scale and goods such as processed foods, jet aircraft and transistor radios, produced and distributed by mass means, provide common artifacts for world-wide consumption. These artifacts may be just as important as change agents as books, plays or broadcasts.

McHale further argues that traditional canons of evaluation are poor guides for an emergency mass culture. These canons place great value on uniqueness, permanence and enduring social judgments like "truth is beauty." This is very much like applying the forms of Plato as a criterion for judging the film Star Wars, the TV drama Soap, or even styrofoam cups! Needed is a clear distinction between value criteria for human life and that used to judge rapidly changing technology. Otherwise, to paraphrase Illich, there will be a further increase of useful objects for useless people. Lasch argues that modern humanity, feeling that the world is no longer intelligible and that it is out of control, has turned attention inward. The narcissistic personality is concerned with "making it now." Lasch's conception of the desired model has shifted from Horatio Alger to the Happy Hooker. The narcissist has

little interest in the future because he has no interest in the past. Unable to place itself in history or to live vicariously through others, the "now" generation can neither plan nor control--just live.

Of course there is great danger that people will give up any effort to invent the future and adopt the attitude that "whatever will be will be." We have very few critical precedents with which to evaluate our present culture. The ethical norms reflected on television today represent "cultural decline" to many Americans. The "failure of nerve" (which implies that human action can make no difference and thus promotes a culture of narcissism) is a very dangerous trend for the future. But as the ancient Chinese were fond of pointing out, precarious situations often provide opportunity. Some economists argue that the scarcity and uniqueness of irreplacable objects in the past made artifacts more significant than human beings. Objects acquired value as the basis of wealth and were regarded as necessary to survival while humans were expendable. At present, mass production and mass media cannot be separated. The unique input of human intelligence is needed.

Social Invention

There are abundant technological innovations in medicine, communications, agriculture, et. cetera, but there are very few organizations involved in social innovation. The media has established itself as one of the few vehicles of social innovation in the world. It influences appearance (clothing, hair styles), language, family (marriage, divorce, child-care), politics, health (food, exercise), religion and status (to mention only a few areas of impact). This is all accomplished under the pretense of entertainment (as distinguished from education) and a demand-supply theory which assumes that the public gets

what it wants. The media, therefore, retains little responsibility for its product. This is a subtle form of education (change) which is not acknowledgeably accountable for its entertainment (education) which even has the appearance of being random.

As with education, everyone has an opinion about what is fair and foul with the media. It appears that local communities can--and do--implement their opinions in the schools. This is exemplified best by what is not allowed in schools. Teachers are not usually permitted to address philosophic domains such as "purpose of life" or "proper values." Teachers rarely trespass upon "sex"--as an academic consideration. Local communities, however, do not appear to have as much influence upon the media as they do with schools. Sex is a major ingredient for news and prime time television programming. The result is that sex sells products. Sex also sells sex (the message is the message).

The educational literature is abundant with various proposals for sex education, violence education, children-effectiveness-training, reality awareness, and values clarification. These "help me make it through the night" proposals illustrate two absurdities. First, many people are naive about innovation. Educational innovations, on a national scale, require a time period of 15 to 40 years. Secondly, educational institutions do not perceive of themselves as places for creation or analysis of social innovation. Educational institutions are not prepared to examine social invention because the inventions cannot be a "subject" of analysis until they are no longer taboo or no longer controversial. During the 1960's, school districts throughout the country slowly changed their standards on hair and dress codes.

They had no process for defending or refuting these social inventions of the media. In most cases, the educational institutions did not even see the "enemy."

Educational institutions do not need slippery innovations. They do need a process for the analysis and creation of social innovations. Other social institutions have failed because they hold their clients responsible for their failures without providing constructive avenues for change. Witness the prison system which is designed to punish rather than invent. Witness the welfare system which does little more than confirm failures and blame the unemployed for their unemployability. Schools should not blame their clients for values taught through a more powerful socializing (and social inventing) structure--the media. Educators can become change-agents and help their clients to reconstruct their views of the world. This is a comprehensive proposal for the development of another source of social invention--the school. Educators are the least biased, most academically prepared sources for providing a check and balance on invention through the media. In THE FAR SIDE OF THE FUTURE, it was suggested that the introduction of "futures studies" into educational organization and curricula provides a broad-based, interdisciplinary process for analyzing and creating change. This is needed as it relates to the media as well as other agencies involved in technological invention.

Parting Comments

As with any serious problem of the present and the future, it is easier to identify the issues than to find solutions. These authors offer a set of brief comments or notes that might lead toward a more comprehensive treatment

of the role of the mass media in educational futures. They are not designed as corrolaries, but rather as guideposts for conscious self-determination.

1. The authors agree with McHale and McLuhan that humanity must now become gatherers of knowledge on the broadest scale. Just as a single set of skills is not sufficient for a modern lifetime, commercial values or norms taken from the majority of entertainment programs do not make a valid basis for planning the future. Understanding the many facets of a complex world requires interdisciplinary scholarship, critical viewing, and new criteria of values. In his book THE IMAGE, Kenneth Boulding suggests a new science, Ikonics, which is intended to restructure all that is known about human behavior into one organic whole. Such a science might deal with the differences between use value and symbolic value of tools and technology as suggested in McHale's "The Plastic Parthenon."

2. Surveys show that people do not read what they say they read nor view what they say they would like to view. Intellectuals even lie about how much television they view because they recognize its anti-intellectual character. We must now make serious studies of the mass media and gather real data about their impact. Speculation must be replaced with information and sound theory.

3. Because the mass media constitute a major institution of modern society as well as a significant part of education and socialization, they must not be allowed to remain entirely under the control of a handful of executives and commercial interests. Educators and the general public must find ways to influence all media as they do public television.

4. Materialism, hedonism, conspicuous consumption, waste of vital resources, and values geared to past industrial society must be reexamined. Because of the vast power of the mass media, our best hope to alter society in the direction of more positive futures lies in changing the messages of media.

5. Because formal education is so labor-intensive, and is, therefore, expensive, there is a strong possibility that overriding external pressures to make it more "efficient" and "productive" for the money expended will dominate. Already there is evidence that educational institutions are losing buying power (in the form of teacher's salaries and new faculty) due to rampant inflation. Private industry has spent far more on research using computers and other media to educate their employees than the public sector. This scenario is disconcerting to many educators, but to ignore the possibility of more extensive media use in public and private education would condemn us to a media world in our own back yard in which we had no input.

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